

Listening In:

Voices of Dads in Responsible Fatherhood Programs



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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Real Strengths

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Introduction

For the past five years, the federal government has supported a groundbreaking experiment in public policy affecting children and families through enhanced education and services targeted to fathers. In September 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provided 101 competitive grants to States, territories, tribal organizations, public and non-profit community agencies, and faith-based organizations for projects focused on promoting Responsible Fatherhood (RF).¹ Many of these grants focused on low-income men—many of them offenders or ex-offenders—with a variety of workshops and strategies built upon, a simple but profound premise: that fathers—and their contributions and needs as parents, partners, and providers—matter in the lives of their children.

Although there is a broad research base on the essential role played by mothers in the well-being of their children, the importance of fathers is less well-documented. To help address that question, RF grantees provide a variety of services, including parenting education, counseling, job training, relationship skills education, financial literacy, and support networks so that fathers can take a constructive, proactive role in their children's lives.

With these initial grants nearing an end², HHS, through the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), is gathering input on grantee successes. As one part of this review, the federal government sought direct feedback from fathers. What do they consider the joys and challenges of fatherhood? What skills have they gained through the RF Initiative and what would they recommend for the future?

¹ The TANF program was renewed in the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 (S.1932), which was signed by the President into law in February 2006. The TANF and Related Programs section of the DRA (Section 7103) authorizes the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), through the direct administration of the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), to provide competitive funding for demonstration projects promoting responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage in their communities.

² The grants are scheduled to end on September 30, 2011, at the close of the federal fiscal year.

Report Methodology

The purpose of the OFA Responsible Fatherhood (RF) Listening Labs project was to develop a nuanced understanding of how these programs have impacted participants and to enhance program delivery for the fatherhood field at-large, by offering a deeper, more accurate understanding of the concerns and perspectives of fathers.

In keeping with the structure of the authorizing legislation for the RF grants (Deficit Reduction Act of 2005—or DRA)³, the OFA RF Listening Labs were broken out into three DRA activity focus areas: Healthy Marriage, Responsible Parenting, and Economic Stability. The OFA RF Listening Labs were conducted between mid-January and mid-February 2011, as in-person events led by culturally competent facilitators from OFA's Technical Assistance team.⁴ The participating sites were located in Coos Bay, OR, Detroit, MI, Fort Pierce, FL, Lancaster, SC, Las Cruces, NM, and Louisville, KY. Each session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and followed a discussion protocol (see Appendix) that covered cross-cutting parenting issues and the unique focus areas of each RF grantee. In engaging OFA RF grantee program participants, facilitators were encouraged to keep conversation focused on:

- How fathers view their responsibilities,
- How fathers grew as parents as a result of the OFA-funded RF program,
- How fatherhood relates to work and economic provision,
- How their relationships with spouses and partners impact parenting,
- What participating fathers thought were the RF program's most helpful "takeaways,"
- The advice of fathers for RF program operators in structuring program activities and services.

This report summarizes the findings of these in-depth discussions, with an eye toward fathers' personal growth and outlook as well as their views on services, ranging from parenting education to employment assistance. Through their comments, fathers provide a candid view of their lives and of the short- and long-term impacts of this 5-year-old public initiative.

³ See the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, Pub.L. 109-171, 120 Stat. 4, enacted February 8, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-109publ171/content-detail.html>.

⁴ The group included senior staff members from ICF International, the Center for Urban Families, the National Fatherhood Initiative, and Child Trends.

The Joys of Fatherhood

“One afternoon as I walked to my son and his friends, one of the kids asked me, ‘Is it true? Are you really an officer in the Army?’ My son beamed and my heart swelled with pride.”

Regardless of the personal challenges they face—some of them daunting—participants in RF programs have a compelling sense of awe about the potential role they can play in their children’s lives. As a result, many see an opportunity not only to teach their children but also to make changes in their own lives. As one father noted, one central joy of fatherhood is that it provides a “clean slate chance” for men to change their own behavior and help shape the lives of other human beings with whom they have a unique family relationship.

RF participants take a sense of accomplishment from serving in fatherly roles, even if it means sacrifice. “I can take joy in choosing to give up certain things I might want in order to provide for my kid’s needs. In giving up something, I feel positive,” one father said. Another father, incarcerated, described efforts to instill values in his children as an enduring legacy.

For many participants, the experience of growing up without a supportive father at home has made them recognize the importance of providing their children with regular emotional support and encouragement. One participant explained, how he strengthens the bond with his son by making sure he says, “I love you,” and giving him a hug every day. Other participants echoed these comments, agreeing that, despite the difficulties of overcoming former experiences, father-presence and steady encouragement are essential for a stable, healthy father-child relationship.

Fatherhood Roles

In citing the joys of fatherhood, participants recognized that fatherhood is both a hierarchical (father-to-child) relationship and one in which support, inspiration, and love flow from child to parent. Waking up to a child’s smile, and receiving a child’s first hug, were joys cited by fathers during these listening sessions. “Even if I come home tired and smelly from working on cars at the gas station, they still run right over to me,” one father said. Another father commented, “I like being with them—playing ball, looking for bugs in the grass—just spending fun time together.” These fathers recognized that parenting was a two-way street: dads provide for their children in important ways but they also saw that the admiration they received from their children was an important element in their own self-worth.

Responsibilities involved with the hierarchical relationship also brought satisfaction. Several participants said they felt most at ease with their father roles when they provided financial security and served as a teacher and guide to their children. Living in an atmosphere of poverty and high job loss, fathers felt pride in knowing that they were providing for their children’s food, clothes, shelter, and education needs.

The differences in raising sons and daughters elicited a variety of comments from RF participants. Many of the fathers held traditional views of boys and girls, a fact that facilitators explored during these sessions. One dad remarked, “With a little boy, you can tell him everything you want to. But with a girl you can’t, since their feelings can easily get hurt.” Another father suggested, “You are more like a teacher with your boys and a protector with your girls.” But there was a diversity of views among the men. One father said he communicates to his girls that they should strive for success and can accomplish anything a boy can achieve. Another said he enjoys helping his girls become strong, independent women.

Regardless of their child’s gender, many fathers said that they welcomed the opportunity to help their children learn and develop. “I don’t have a problem teaching them right from wrong,” another participant said. “There’s something rewarding about watching them develop...and particularly, watching my son learn things that I show him is one of the greatest things in the world.” Fathers also took joy because their children are following a different path from their own. One father appreciated that his children “do the right thing...when they are not following the path that I went through when I was their age.”

Though child well-being is always a central issue for these fathers, men recognized also that instruction in positive parenting brought growth in their own behaviors. “For me, the only thing I knew how to do was punish my kids. That was my idea of parenting and being a father. Now I enjoy talking with my kids to help them to figure out what they did right and wrong.... That’s what is most enjoyable about being a father for me.”

To some program participants, the job of fatherhood means making some life-altering changes. “You’ve got to make good decisions as a dad, and when you’re about to do something wrong you remember you aren’t just hurting yourself. You’ve got to think about your kids,” one said. “Honestly, I enjoy the responsibility of fatherhood because it gives you a reason to live.”

Actions Speak Volumes

Although direct counseling and education of children are important, some fathers noted that actions speak louder than words. “It’s not just what you say to your children, but more importantly, how you live and how they see you behave with their mothers and others,” one remarked. Another father said, “They watch your actions, not just what you say. And to be honest, that’s scary.”

Some fathers said that it’s important to watch the little things you do as a dad. “[Children] can sniff out hypocrisy. But they really enjoy seeing you cook dinner together, flirt, or play together. It’s important to show kids what good relationships are.” Open and early communication about all subjects, including sex and relationships—even helping 5-year-olds process difficult experiences—is necessary.

Participants emphasized that children raised in challenging environments need special attention. “If a kid grows up in a house where drugs are abused, or if kids are neglected or physically hurt, it’s a lot harder for [him or her] to ‘start fresh’ or really grasp how parenting and relationships are supposed to work,” one father described from his own experience. He recommended “staying on the lookout” for these kinds of conversational opportunities all the time—whether in homes, at baseball games, in religious settings, or in schools.

Children also are quick to observe how a father treats his wife, partner, or the mother of his child, factors that fathers must not ignore. As one man stated, “How I treat my wife is how my son will learn to treat his wife.”

Ages and Stages

Many fathers described the birth of their children as the most joyous aspect of their fatherhood experience. Fathers who were in prison at the time of their children’s births mention often that their most joyous time of fatherhood occurs when their children visit.

During the listening sessions, men were quick to note that the unconditional love shown by children during their youngest years is a powerful force in their lives. One father noted that despite his faults and mistakes, he draws great strength from his daughter’s unconditional love. He related how he enjoyed playing with his daughter in the mornings before he left for work and returning home to the same “I love you, Daddy,” that he had heard earlier in the day.

Another father described a breakthrough moment with his young son, who had always called him by his first name during the man’s visits. The first time the boy called him Daddy was a momentous occasion. “That brought me a lot of joy.”

As their children get older, men said they saw the value of instilling positive values and teaching their children specific activities, from sports to music. Answering questions and engaging children in conversation were seen as effective ways for fathers to develop stronger relationships with their children. Also, some men acknowledged that the learning process is a two-way system: children provide fathers with new knowledge learned in school or remind their fathers of the value of good manners, such as not swearing.

One father described the value of “showing your kids love, not buying their love” as most important to him. He shared that he meets them in settings preferred by his teenage and adult children, and shows them respect “by going to them.” “The most important thing,” he stressed, “is consistently showing interest in your children on their terms and in a way that honors activities they enjoy.”

Fathers described the pride and joy in witnessing their children's accomplishments, particularly in education. One participant, who was not present during most of his son's childhood years, explained how he burst into tears while watching his son graduate from high school. Attending a child's extracurricular activities was another source of happiness. One father recalled how his daughter's face lit up when she saw him in the audience at a cheerleading competition. He learned, from this experience, about the positive effect of his action on his child's life.

An older father spoke of the satisfaction derived from seeing his children develop into productive and compassionate adults. Another man commented about how happy he is when his children reflect on past advice they received and say to him, "You know what dad? You were right."

Fathering Challenges

"When I look in the mirror, I wish there was some way to help them avoid the negatives from the path that I took."

Many participants in federal RF programs face at least one of these challenges: past or current incarceration; a history of substance abuse; unemployment or underemployment; and geographic distance from their families. These are realities the fathers encounter every day as they seek stronger relationships with their children. Whether held in community settings or correctional institutions, these Listening Labs offered fathers an opportunity to discuss and explore some of these stark challenges.

At a session with incarcerated fathers, men said that the sheer distance from their children—both in terms of miles and access—was the most common challenge. "What's hardest here in prison is the absence from my kids," one said. But the judgments children might make about their convicted fathers was another common theme. "It hurts to think they knew me as a criminal, as someone who carried a gun while they were growing up: How can I tell them to do differently than me, without feeling like a hypocrite?"

For fathers with older children, such issues took on even greater importance. "It's painful realizing my 18 year-old son is following my path, hustling and selling drugs," said one dad. "I don't know what to say to him, or how to stop him from doing what I did." Added another: "How can I ask my kids to obey the rules or do other things I'm not willing to do?"

At Listening Labs in community settings, men also faced challenges such as unemployment and the pressures of child support payments. Many voiced deep frustration over what one termed "uncontrollable" barriers such as the economy, job loss, child support, and criminal backgrounds. These barriers posed obstacles not only to getting a job but also to fathers' self-esteem in dealing with their families.

Parenting

For some dads, the inter-generational dynamic is at the forefront as they consider their family relationships. “It’s hard realizing I’m doing just what my father did,” one dad said. “I didn’t end up copying every bad habit he had, but I see a lot of his ways in the way I’ve raised my boys.”

Among dads with older children, these issues continue to weigh heavily as some believe they taught negative habits to their own children. “It’s real tough seeing your kids do things you used to do—but gave up,” one father said. “It’s painful seeing my [young adult] sons liking drugs and fancy weekends and fast cars and all that. And yet they have to learn for themselves. Now that they’re grown, all I can do is love them and keep telling them the truth. But it’s tough watching them make bad choices.”

Among fathers who were incarcerated or at a drug-treatment facility, re-establishing contact with their children was a paramount concern. Said a father living at a drug treatment facility, “The hard part for me is learning all of this good stuff—new skills—and not being able to use them right now with my girlfriend and kids.” Another father stated that when he does see his children, it’s hard to say ‘no.’ Said one dad, “I’m trying to make up for lost time and it’s hard to say no. That’s the hardest part for me.”

Another challenge is dealing with the experience of failure—whether it involves letting children down or seeing them fail in one of their own experiences. “The hardest thing for me is watching my children fail, even after working together or trying to do things right. It breaks your heart to see them fall down,” a younger father explained.

Participants also discussed how to be a good role model to their children. Some fathers who have not completed high school relayed that they struggle to instill the importance of education in their children. Other participants revealed that they place pressure on themselves so their children do not see them become depressed or fail financially.

During the discussion, fathers were quick to share their own mistakes in life as they discussed a goal of “keeping their kids on the straight and narrow.” Yet incarcerated parents were concerned that they could not physically or emotionally protect their children. Said one, “My son is big and people pick on him, and I don’t like seeing him hurt. So the hardest part for me is protecting his feelings while I’m in here (prison).” By acknowledging their past criminal and drug behavior, however, many fathers said that they described their experiences—in general terms—to their children as a failure the youngsters shouldn’t emulate. Yet even that came with some worries, as fathers admitted that they fear losing the respect of their children if they talk too much about the past. Some said they were torn about how best to teach their children.

Relating to the Child's Mother

One oft-cited challenge among the men was how to maintain a civil and healthy relationship with their children's mother. "Working with the mother is very hard—especially when we're on different pages," one dad said. "If I have a different set of rules than she does, then we're always running into trouble with the kids." Other difficulties reported include struggles related to abuse, neglect, and addiction. "My boy's mom is doing drugs. Because of her neglect, my five-year-old son saw things no adult should ever see. He almost lost his life, so he has to overcome a very difficult start. That's hard to see."

Additionally, some men said society's traditional acceptance of the woman's role as "nurturer"—in contrast to a man being the "provider"—can make them feel as though they are at a parenting disadvantage. For example, one father had to return to work immediately after his child's birth in contrast to the child's mother, whom, he said, "society expected to stay home." Such comments reinforced the need for RF programs to involve fathers early on in the lives of their children.

Some fathers talked about the struggles of learning to be a good partner (to a girlfriend) and to parent in a different way than they experienced during their own childhood. Other participants' fathers were not active in their lives, and as a result, these men didn't know how to be a good father, husband, or partner. "The hardest part for me is learning to not try to control my wife and kids...versus trying to have a positive influence on them," one said. "It used to be all about what I wanted to do because I made the money and I was the man of the house. That's exactly how the men in my family handled that when I was growing up. It's all that I saw. . . so learning how to do that differently has been difficult for me."

Some men indicated that they have some success in co-parenting with a partner. "If a father and mother can get on the same team," one dad said, "the work of parenthood is considerably easier." Men recognized also that both parents need patience and open dialogue, particularly during a child's teenage years.

Custody and Child Support Issues

An inability to spend sufficient time with children because of limited access or visitation rights was another frequently noted frustration. Many fathers expressed concerns that their children are not receiving instruction in critical life skills such as perseverance and empathy. One father who did not have custody and had few visitation rights described his frustration over not being allowed to see his children. "It's hard when society doesn't give you a break, and my partner doesn't think I live up to her standards," he said.

Child-support compliance is connected closely to time with, and access to, children. Participants described State child-support enforcement agencies as out of date, unfair in their treatment of men, and destructive to the long-term financial prospects of fathers who fall behind in child support payments. With mounting child support arrears, some fathers said it is impossible to buy a car or improve their housing situation. Participants were adamant that the legal and financial restrictions associated with the child-support system need to become more “father friendly.”

Fatherhood, Healthy Marriage, and Relationships

“My wife and I talk together about parenting strategies, and we’re on the same team now compared to where we were before.”

For many men in RF programs, relationships with family members are often under strain because of separation or conflict. Left unresolved, these issues can ultimately affect child well-being and household stability. Moreover, to many fathers, these challenges are not new. “Lots of families—like the one I grew up in—would always sweep things under the rug rather than put your problems on the table,” one dad said. Participation in an RF program taught this man the importance of establishing strong lines of communication—even while he was in prison.

This theme of learning how to interact with children and other adults—the foundation of strong relationships—came through clearly in these Listening Labs. Many dads said that through RF programs they have acquired a new communications skill set, one that allows them to interact in a healthy way with their child and the child’s mother. Dads in these programs recognize the link between child and adult relationships. As one participant said, “Positive contact with my child has generally helped boost my contact with their mom.”

Several dads said they have developed a “children-first” mentality as a result of participation in RF programs. This emphasis has several benefits, including reduced conflict with the child’s mother. Raising children is considerably easier if “you can work from the same page” with a child’s mother, one man said. An improved relationship with a child also can have a positive impact on the relationship with his or her mother. One incarcerated father said that showing gratitude to a child’s mother had a reciprocal impact: it led to more phone calls with and visits from his children—trends that continued after his release.

Another takeaway from RF program participation was that fatherhood education has helped men to understand their children’s experiences better. For example, having an incarcerated father can harm children in their social relationships at school or in the community. As a result, linking a father’s and a child’s experience is a theme across many RF programs.

Gains for Married Fathers

A healthy and stable spousal relationship is a source of strength for many married fathers, especially during times of emotional and financial stress. “It isn’t fun being poor and depressed,” one father said; his supportive wife has helped him “endure tough times.”

A father married for 27 years noted that RF program participation helped him respect and incorporate his wife’s views into family decisions. “We make decisions together now. Today my wife feels comfortable telling me if she thinks I’m doing something wrong.” Most men agreed that parenting is most effective when both spouses communicate well. Fathers also said they recognized that children are more emotionally stable when both parents are together and model positive behaviors. “Over time,” one dad said, “my wife and I got to talk together about parenting strategies, and to learn how to be on the same team.”

Incarcerated fathers said that their marriages benefitted from participation in an RF program, as family members were able to obtain help. “At the time of my incarceration, it taught my wife and kids that my being in here wasn’t their fault—even though they were hurting,” one dad noted. A consistent message from staff members was important, as it provided reassurance to both fathers and their children. In cases where spousal relationships were not strong, the parents had developed coping strategies such as avoiding arguments in front of their children. RF program education “helps us appreciate the roles our wives or partners play back home,” one participant said.

Dads said that they also have learned how to focus on constructive rather than negative comments and to listen to everyone more effectively. As one dad summarized, “This class helps you not just be a better father but a better husband, too.”

Breaking an Abusive Cycle

Much like the typical discussions that take place in RF classes, the Listening Labs featured many frank comments from men about trying to atone for past behaviors. At one session, a man was upfront about his own shortcomings. “I now realize I was abusive, both emotionally and physically with [the mother of my child]. I realize now that I neglected her, and it’s hard to deal with that fact.”

At one session, several men admitted that they had been selfish, controlling, verbally abusive, and emotionally unavailable to their partners and children prior to joining the RF program. “Since I’ve been in the program, I’ve learned that it’s not all about me, which is how I was before I started the program. The stuff that I’m learning now about communication, listening, [and] talking things out are things that I can apply to my relationship with my partner, kids, and other aspects of my life.”

Some consensus also emerged that fatherhood classes had helped participants understand the mother's point of view. One man described how the class facilitator encouraged each person in his class to find constructive ways to work with his children's mother and to understand the difficulties she faces, particularly if her children's father is incarcerated. Said another participant, "I've been rethinking about who she is, how she parents, and how I can find things to appreciate about her. That will help me as a dad in the future."

One father who acknowledged past trouble with the law said RF education led him to believe that "anyone could have a second chance." He said the program provided someone to supervise visits with his son, which enabled the man and the child's mother to sit amicably in the same room. After many weekend visits, a stronger relationship emerged with the child's mother. "We learned that it's not about us—it's about our son."

Said a divorced dad in the same session, "For me, it's like the light was always on," the man said, but it "now seems bright as the sunshine." He described how the class helped both parents "take down some of the walls" to the point where they now can talk peacefully with each other. While they don't expect to remarry, "We're working through things, and more than before we do partner in the work of parenting our boy."

One priority for some men is that the mothers of their children speak positively of them. Some fathers noted that the mothers of their children are now living with another adult male partner. In such cases, a mother should not speak disrespectfully of the child's father and respect the father's desire to improve and stay in his child's life. Typical was the comment of one dad that the relationship with the other parent "could make or break your relationship with your child." Some men said RF activities helped with this issue, but others said problems still remained, such as mothers who set all parameters for father-child visitation, in spite of legal protections for dads who pay child support. Nonetheless, one father said that he is applying his new skills not only with his own child but with others: "[My child's mother] has two [other] kids and their daddy didn't show up, so I took the responsibility."

The only downside of RF program participation for some men is that their incarceration has prevented them from practicing their new skills. These fathers were concerned with whether the changes would "stick" once they return to their families. To ensure a fresh start, many men said they planned to move away from their old neighborhoods after release. "This will give me a chance to start fresh," one noted. Other fathers expanded on this point. One remarked that he changed his relationship with himself as a result of the program. "This program has helped me to love myself. I figured out that the more I love myself, the more I can love [my child's mother]. I used to be real selfish. Now I try to listen and communicate my thoughts and feelings with her more now than I did before."

Fathers as Providers

"I went two years without finding a job. Coming here, I built a personal relationship with some of the guys in the class, and now I have someone I can talk to... These people help with my decisions, and they're helping me be a better man."

At one of the six Listening Labs for this project, the first question about jobs prompted a dozen men to try to speak at once—a sign of the gravity with which RF participants regard the issue of employment. Fathers relayed that they believe strongly that working is a key to success—not just economically but in terms of maintaining relationships with children and family.

By comparison, the men said, unemployment negatively affects self-esteem, contributes to depression, and undermines relationships. American culture honors a working father, and the dads believed that unemployment causes them to receive less respect in the community and society at large. Some dads said they felt angry and unable to control their emotions around others when thinking about this issue. Unemployment brings high levels of stress and contributes to lack of sleep, they noted. Fortunately, however, they also cited activities provided by the RF program as essential to developing skills, motivation, and employment success.

Work, Unemployment, and Parenting

Fatherhood participants strongly agreed that unemployment affects a man's relationship with his children. The short-term effect is that it robs a father of his ability to support the needs of his children, but some said it can carry long-term pain as well. One participant worried that if his utilities were shut off due to lack of payment, it would further complicate efforts to see his children regularly. Participants also reported efforts to hide the stress of unemployment from their children. Fathers with very young children were less concerned about the negative perceptions of unemployment but acknowledged it would become harder as their children grow older and more aware of the circumstances around them.

Despite the challenges of unemployment, several participants said they have turned this difficult period into a learning opportunity for their children. One father sought to bring his family closer together in prayer by sharing the struggles of unemployment with his son. Another used his apartment's lack of electricity to teach survival skills to his two children and drive home the importance of "making it to the next day." Obstacles do present opportunities, several dads said. No television can mean more time for reading, while lack of money for a movie is a chance to go to a park or outdoor festival. "Challenges are a chance to teach kids," one man explained.

Participants identified two primary sources of support during bouts of unemployment—their religion and the peers in their fatherhood groups. Several participants cited how they had to address their spiritual life first, before they dealt with their unemployment. Religious belief was "the foundation" for

these fathers when faced with adversity. Others said that the group of peers they have met through the fatherhood program was an important source of support for coping with job challenges. These men are “part of my team,” one man said.

While some sought to cushion their children from the stress of unemployment, participants acknowledged that joblessness is a strain on the father’s confidence as well as his relationships with family and his child’s mother. Participants advocated that employment is critical to self-esteem, since it allows fathers to provide economic security to their family. By comparison, they discovered that unemployment leads to lower self-esteem, more frequent arguments with spouses/partners, and a heightened sense of fear about being looked down upon in the community. Many fathers said they tried to do the best they could to model good behavior, despite joblessness. If a man responds to unemployment by sitting around the house, children will see this as acceptable and normal behavior, one dad said. Several fathers said they also took pride in performing household chores. “All day I cook, clean, drive my children around, and do laundry. I may be unemployed, but I am definitely working,” one man said.

For some dads, the hardest part of unemployment or underemployment is saying ‘no’ to their children about certain child desires. Said one man, “It’s tough to have to tell your kids ‘no,’ not just to things they shouldn’t have but to things all kids should have”—such as a new pair of shoes. Other fathers noted that having to move from full-, to part-, to full-time employment gave them more time with their children. Still, there was a fear among some that failing to provide for a family “makes you feel less than a man.”

Work Supports for Fathers

Along with counseling, RF programs provide tangible job assistance benefits; many dads said these services have contributed to their long-term success. At one site, fathers said the first 10 minutes of every meeting with caseworkers is focused on new employment opportunities. Services provided by grantees include:

- Job-skill assessments,
- Resume development,
- Mock job interviews,
- Tips for success on the job.

Through group and one-on-one time with caseworkers some men said they became aware of personal skill sets they hadn’t realized they possessed. RF services also helped some men overcome feelings of intimidation and insecurity about finding a new career. In fact, several fathers said they would not have found their current jobs without supports from the RF program. In one instance, RF staff helped a dad

create a portfolio of his previous carpet laying work, advertise his skills, and connect to prospective employers. Now the father is the lead carpet layer with a local company.

Aside from these direct services, fathers also welcomed the peer support and motivation provided by RF programs. Several dads noted that self-motivation was a challenge when they first entered the program. But with an empathetic case worker and helpful peers in a fatherhood support group, some men developed a new sense of responsibility focused on awareness of the need to support their children. Other fathers said that program participation made them more comfortable asking for assistance, not only with job issues but also on struggles with addiction and substance abuse.

While helping to identify men's job skills, RF programs also provide specific training to meet certain skill gaps, several dads noted. Staff members also check in regularly and conduct post-placement follow up once a man gets a job—two services cited by participants as highly effective. Perhaps most important for some men, RF programs provide a way to address their criminal background in a way that focuses on the future, not the past. Several dads said that through their work with caseworkers, they have developed personally and have learned from their mistakes.

In addition to backing participants' credibility, some fatherhood programs were able to subsidize wages through their other programs and partnerships. As one father related, "I had experience and skills but couldn't get hired. The program paid for the first three months of my wages so I could have a chance to prove myself." Community-based organizations serving as grantees often acted as a "switchboard" among fathers, supportive services, and employment. Several fathers, in citing helpful services through the program, noted that they had developed the self-confidence and skills to find their own jobs.

Preparing the Next Generation of Fathers

"When your kids start asking you questions, that's when you need to be ready to respond."

Men in listening sessions agreed about the importance of reaching out to children to discuss relationships, responsibilities, parenting, and sexuality—for boys and future fathers in particular. While some believed that this discussion should take place in school, potentially during the middle school years, there was agreement on the need for action. "Where I live, some 10-year-olds are having sex," one participant said. This led some men to recommend beginning these conversations "perhaps even when kids are 5 or 6—but certainly before they're 12 or 13."

Dads cited the importance of "looking for opportunities" to talk with their sons about such topics, including how to treat a woman. These events may occur "when listening to a song on the radio, or watching a television show," one man said. There was consensus, however, about the need to be

prepared for the discussion. “For me, it seemed like I was always too late,” one dad noted. “Every time I spoke up, I was just a little behind where my kids were. So I think you should sometimes introduce this material before you think they’re ready.”

Opinions differed about when boys can understand sex and responsibilities. Two men said they thought the best time was between the ages of 8 and 12, between late elementary school and middle school. “For me, it would have been 8th grade, when I started smoking pot and began going downhill,” one participant shared. But others thought that was too late. “It should happen way earlier. My own 5-year-old son needs help processing tough experiences, and knowing why some things [are] wrong. If he needs good counsel now, then talking about fatherhood should happen in elementary school.”

Others felt this question depends on each particular child, and that parents should decide how to raise these important topics as their own children grow older. “While it probably should happen between 13 and 18, I’d say it depends on the boy. Everyone needs to understand communication skills, and how to treat girls, and basic relationship expectations. Parents should use daily life experiences—things on TV or advertising—as opportunities to raise these topics with their kids.”

Depending on the child’s maturity level, participants at one listening session believed it was appropriate to introduce their sons to the topics of fatherhood and healthy relationships between the ages of 5 and 10. The men said it is critical to address these topics early in a child’s life to counteract misinformation they receive through their peers or the internet.

The topic of where children should get information prompted intense discussion. While some cited the importance of a sex-education class, one favored information from a community center, church or “frankly, wherever they can get it.” Big Brother programs, grandparents, afterschool programs, and local recreation centers were all mentioned as locations where children should receive information on fatherhood and healthy relationships.

Religious institutions also play a role in delivering positive messages to children about how to build healthy relationships. “I’m not religious, but there’s a spiritual component to these subjects and for some people, that’s their way to understanding,” one participant expressed. Houses of worship help instill values, give moral direction, and build strong social skills; many said it is difficult to have a true spirit of community giving without the influence of religion.

Nonetheless, a number of fathers said parents and family members should provide much of the information. When one father said parents should wait until a child initiates the conversation, most men were quick to note that they believed otherwise. “The earlier you do it will make girls feel better about themselves and will teach boys to respect girls. It’s never too early and never too late.”

Programs for Fathers: Recommendations for Educators and Service Providers

“It’s like once a week I get transported out of this [prison], to another space to think about fatherhood issues.”

Fathers—particularly those in prison or drug treatment centers—face day-to-day pressures that can distract them from thinking about how to be a good parent. Even for fathers in the community, lack of access and visitation rights can turn feelings of concern for children into feelings of anger toward a child’s mother or “the system” that limits access. Yet the men participating in these Listening Labs were united in expressing gratitude toward their RF programs and in offering suggestions for the future.

Most men indicated that they were treated with respect throughout the time in the RF program. This experience helped them focus on their children, and provided both a respite from current problems and a roadmap toward self-respect and the respect of their children. “I turned around as a dad 180 degrees as a result of this class,” said one dad. He noted that the facilitator of the parenting class, a woman, treated the men with respect and dignity. “She taught us as human beings, not as inmates. She pulls us up.”

The Value of Responsible Fatherhood Programs

In this section, we examine fathers’ comments about the value of their RF education programs, as well as their suggestions for how to continue and improve programs in the future.

Throughout this report, participants have offered examples of how RF programs improve their skills and their ability to interact with their children and other adults in their lives. Some of these included tangible benefits, such as: job-search assistance and resume development; instruction about child development at specific ages and stages; and help in improving relationships with a child’s mother and other adults. Fathers noted also how programming and activities helped develop a greater sense of self-awareness and self-confidence in meeting life’s challenges. This is particularly important for men who feel marginalized by legal and social service systems.

Several incarcerated men pointed out that, fatherhood activities are different from other prison classes, where instructors may treat them in negative ways. One father reported, for example, that when he shared in another class how many children he had, the instructor responded, “How could you have so many kids?!” By comparison, facilitators of RF programs build trust among participants, and support them in their family lives in appropriate ways. Said one participant, “Today I have communication skills I can use with my daughters and sons. I can be a friend to them; not just spoil them with the things money can buy.”

Other men cited the value of learning self-worth. Prior to enrollment in an RF program, “Being a father meant being a provider only,” one dad noted. But after six weeks in an intensive education program, “I now see being a father as being a listener, nurturer, and sharer of my feelings as well as a listener to the feelings of my wife and kids, which I never did before.”

The program’s ability to motivate participants and provide a peer-support system also was integral in helping men find and keep jobs. Several participants said self-motivation was a challenge when they first entered the program. But with help from dedicated and concerned case workers as well as their peers in fatherhood support groups, they reported a considerable boost in motivation to become employed and to engage their children. These support networks also helped participants feel confident in asking for help, overcoming struggles with addiction and substance abuse, and dealing with long standing feelings of abandonment by their own fathers. Participants found also they were motivated to share the lessons they had learned through the RF program with their children and those in the community. Added one man, “The class gives us space to hear how other men are approaching their responsibilities as dads—including guys with bigger families and more responsibility than me.”

Job-related supports provided men with resources, training, direction, and accountability. Several fathers stated they would not have found their current job without the job search, preparedness, and placement supports from the fatherhood program. For many participants, just being given a list of available employment positions would have been insufficient. Fathers needed to build their work preparedness from a foundational level that focuses on how to pursue jobs through the development of resumes, interview skills, and help in matching skills to industries and jobs.

In addition to support with core job skills, participants valued highly the mentoring and motivation they received from program staff. A number of fathers acknowledged that they entered the program not fully motivated to find and succeed in a new job. The program “helped me navigate some really tough situations—sometimes just by helping me remember I wasn’t completely alone,” one participant shared. “This program gave us specific tools, too.”

Many men described how they made better parenting choices and life decisions as a result of these programs. “I used to buy love from my kids. Now we have real love and spend time together talking and dealing with the pressures they actually face.”

Several men spoke highly of the program’s various activities. Fathers said that they sent letters to their children, told them stories, and engaged in a higher level of interaction with their children as a result of the program. As one incarcerated man with four children described, “This class gives me opportunities to write constructive letters to my kids, and I don’t take that for granted.” In the words of another participant, “This class doesn’t create any burden on my family. When I send things home, they’re always positive.”

Recommendations for the Future

When exploring how to improve fatherhood programs, several men said they would recommend even more opportunities for contact with children. This was especially important for incarcerated fathers. Options mentioned include additional phone calls or video or audio recordings. One example offered was for fathers to make audio recordings of a book that could function as a bedtime story from dad. Making a video also could showcase positive examples of change among participants.

Many men said that they would like to hear from more fathers who have come before them. “Get the people who really have lived this stuff—the success stories—in front of more men,” one father said. These testimonials could be particularly helpful if older men related stories and guidance to younger men, “to help them overcome challenges.”

One RF program participant said it is important to develop peer mentors: dads who have made gains as a result from a fatherhood program and who can help others. Programs could identify such dads and provide small monetary incentives, such as gas cards, to encourage them to mentor others. “When someone wants to help other guys wherever they go, maybe we could find a way to be strategic and empower them,” another participant added.

It is fundamental to help fathers learn at a pace appropriate for them. Translating anger into reflection and action is essential for fathers in these programs, although “you can only do that when guys are at a place to change and learn,” according to one participant. “You can’t force that on someone. They have to be ready for it.”

Improving relationships with spouses, partners, and ex-girlfriends is another major issue, about which men offered several suggestions. Many favored joint classes attended by men and women (some fatherhood programs currently conduct such programming), while others recommended video-conferencing to link incarcerated men to the mothers of their children. According to many men, an underlying need is to improve communications, including in relation to a child’s mother.

Participants were nearly unanimous in their agreement that a fatherhood program must adopt many goals—improvements in life, work, and interaction with family and the community. Other useful life skill topics include help with anger, stress management, and time management. In addition, subject matter experts could deliver talks about real-world issues such as child support, financial management, and conflict resolution. General Educational Development (GED) classes and crisis hotlines were two other priorities that fathers frequently mentioned.

Participants felt that, for a fatherhood program to find success, it needs to have strong connections to the local community. Established relationships with local employers, State agencies, and nonprofits can be leveraged on behalf of fathers to facilitate job connections and, as one participant said, “puts you in

the right place at the right time with the right people.” Several men cited the importance of meeting with local public officials to advocate on behalf of father-friendly policies.

The idea of helping the next generation of fathers drew a particularly supportive response. “Offer services to boys before they become fathers. . . I know that would have helped me before I started having children,” one man said. Another view expressed was that programs should offer outreach to foster care systems as well so that previously absent fathers can find and potentially re-connect with their children. “Offer services that go to parents and children at the same time; get the whole family involved,” one dad said. “The earlier the kids learn it, the better. There’ll be a lot of happy kids if we do it this way.”

Conclusion

RF programs provide many benefits for participants, from short-term services such as job-search assistance to long-term gains, like the mastery of new interpersonal skills to improve relationships with children and family members. The fathers selected for these Listening Labs were forthright in outlining these gains in detail:

- Employment outreach helped men assess their skills, write resumes, prepare for interviews, and—perhaps most important—gain self-confidence to deal with the work world.
- Through parenting classes, men identified their problem behaviors and learned new strategies to interact with their children and the children’s mother. Through a support group consisting of RF staff and peers in the program, many men—even those in prison—are developing networks that encourage each other to become more proactive in their family lives and embrace the joys of fatherhood.

As the first set of federal RF grants nears an end, there is ample evidence that these activities generate long-term gains for men and their families. The programs also fill a sizable void in the policy arena. While government focuses—appropriately—most of its family policy efforts on custodial parents, especially women, society continues to have a major stake in helping fathers increase their roles in child well-being. In short, RF programs provide an important and complementary service that has generated many positive personal and family gains for the men directly consulted for this analysis. If these gains can translate into direct benefits for our nation’s sons and daughters, they will be well worth the public investment.

Listening Lab Discussion Guide

Appendix

Introductory Questions

- What does being a father mean to you?
- What's easy...what do you enjoy most about being a father?
- What's hard...or what are the biggest challenges you've faced as a father?

Healthy Marriage Focus

- Before the program, what was your idea of a healthy relationship? How has your view changed, if at all, as a result of your participation in the program?
- What areas of your personal relationship have been impacted the most, as a result of your participation in this program? (If you aren't currently in a relationship, you can also discuss specific changes you plan to make in future relationships...)

Responsible Parenting

- How do you think the program has helped you and others in the class become better fathers?
- How does your relationship with the child's mother impact your parenting responsibilities?
- *A question particularly for fathers who have had children by more than one woman:* Based on what you have learned regarding parenting, how will these skills impact your decision on having more children?

Economic Stability

- How does working (or being unemployed) affect your parenting?
- How important is it that this program helps men to find and keep jobs?
- If the program stopped providing support around job-training and placement, would you continue to participate?
- In addition to help with job-training or employment support, what part(s) of the fatherhood program have you gotten the most out of—and why?

Cross-Cutting

- Throughout the country there are numerous organizations just beginning fatherhood programs in their community. What advice could you offer about the kinds of parenting services most important to make a fatherhood program effective?
- A 2-part question: From your perspective, when should boys/males be introduced to topics that prepare them for fatherhood—topics like communication, healthy relationships, what it means to be a father, and other elements of this fatherhood class? Second, where should they receive this information—i.e., their school, their church or religious congregation, the Boy Scouts, etc.?



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